

\$11.5M set for bypass

CHRIS PARKER, Staff Writer
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BENNINGTON — Gov. James Douglas is calling for \$11.5 million for the Bennington Bypass in his proposed budget, but some local officials say they're concerned whether the money will be there come summertime.

The governor's budget, unveiled Jan. 23, includes \$9 million for the northern leg and \$2 million for the southern leg. Another \$437,000 has been earmarked for preliminary engineering work on the proposed welcome center for the bypass interchange.

In his last budget, Douglas proposed \$5.3 million for the northern leg and \$1.1 million for the southern leg. Come the end of the 2004-2005 legislative session, all the northern leg money was still in the budget, but the southern leg money was cut almost in half, to \$600,000.

Budget reflects views

The governor's new budget shows that he regards the bypass project as important for the region's future, said spokesman Jason Gibbs.

"The bypass remains, in its entirety, a priority for Gov. Douglas and the state Agency of Transportation," he said. "The governor is hopeful the Legislature will do the right thing and support his recommendation."

The budget is currently being debated in the House, said Rep. Timothy R. Corcoran II, a member of the House Transportation Committee.

The Democrat from Bennington said the money would be used mostly for construction, rights of way acquisitions and design work.

"I'm very pleased with the administration for putting that money in," he said.

Money may not last

Sen. Dick Sears, D-Bennington, said he was also happy about the governor's budget but concerned what could happen to the money by the summer.

"I hope we can at least hold onto what we've got now," he said.

Before last year's session ended, Corcoran successfully lobbied to eliminate language from the previous year's transportation bill that created restrictions on how legislators could use money on the almost \$200 million, three-pronged bypass project. He also helped add a caveat that the AOT could add money to projects anytime.

As a result, shortly after the Legislature closed for the session, Vermont Agency of Transportation Secretary Dawn Terrill appropriated \$200,000 more for the southern leg, for a total of \$800,000.

Corcoran has said that one of his goals this year is to address the need for the state to match federal funding for the bypass and the welcome center.

Last summer, U.S. Sens. James Jeffords, I-Vt., and Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., helped secure a highway bill that will bring \$1 billion to Vermont through 2009.

The bill includes \$30 million-plus for Bennington County's road, bridge and rail projects.

About two-thirds of the money, \$20 million, will go toward ongoing work on the northern leg of the bypass and \$6.5 million is for planning and construction for a new welcome center.

Need to match federal dollars

Sears said the state needs to secure about \$14 million a year for four years in order to match the federal dollars earmarked for the state.

In retrospect, he said state officials should have used GARVEE bonds backed by the federal government to pay for such projects as the bypass.

"We have built the bypass on a pay-as-you-go basis and that's what's wrong," he said. "We would have saved tons of money had we paid for this on a bond basis."

James Harris, who's in his sixth month as project manager for the bypass, said he is currently working to secure rights of way from property owners along the path of the proposed northern leg.

He said the entire project will likely be complete by 2012.

Preparing for welcome center

Meanwhile, AOT officials are preparing information to be presented to the Federal Highway Administration about the proposed location of the welcome center.

Federal regulators have some concerns about the site, particularly with regard to safety and traffic patterns.

But Michael Canavan, a design and structure engineer for the administration, said the state is simply being asked to provide supporting documentation about why the site was chosen over others, including a spot in the downtown.

"Our goal is to make sure the decision process has been well thought out," he said, adding that he wasn't being critical of the AOT's proposal.